

From a few resounding voices to a multitude of whimpers. The role of writers towards modern cultural policy in Mexico

Von ein paar lauten Stimmen zum vielfältigen Winseln. Die Rolle der Schriftsteller für eine moderne Kulturpolitik in Mexiko

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Abstract

In this article I will look into the role of writers towards cultural policy in Mexico. Although artists generally do not participate in policy planning, some specific writers and their literary cencacles have been fundamental in shaping Mexican cultural policy. This relation between writers and the state will be analysed through some literary groups and their relation to politics and cultural policy in the 20th century, a relation that in the 21st century has changed as writers and their publications have lost terrain to social media. FONCA was the institution that resulted from this relationship dedicated to foster artistic production from 1989 to 2020. I will analyse FONCA and Mexico's arts policy, updating previous studies, from a dual perspective: as a writer and researcher that has been beneficiary and judge of its programmes.

In diesem Artikel möchte ich die Rolle von Schriftstellern in der mexikanischen Kulturpolitik untersuchen. Obwohl Künstler in der Regel nicht an der politischen Planung beteiligt sind, haben einige spezielle Schriftsteller und ihre literarischen Zirkel die mexikanische Kulturpolitik entscheidend mitgestaltet. Diese Beziehung zwischen Schriftstellern und dem Staat wird anhand einiger literarischer Gruppen und ihrer Beziehung zur Politik und Kulturpolitik im 20. Jh. analysiert, eine Beziehung, die sich im 21. Jh. verändert hat, da die Schriftsteller und ihre Publikationen ihr Terrain an die sozialen Medien verloren haben. FONCA war die Institution, die aus dieser Beziehung hervorging und sich der Förderung der künstlerischen Produktion von 1989 bis 2020 widmete. Ich werde die FONCA und die mexikanische Kunstpolitik analysieren, indem ich frühere Studien aktualisiere, und zwar aus einer doppelten Perspektive: als Schriftsteller und Forscher, der von den Programmen der FONCA profitiert und sie beurteilt hat.

Keywords

cultural history / Kulturgeschichte; arts organizations / Kulturorganisation; cultural policy / Kulturpolitik; literature / Literatur; state / Staat

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Introduction¹

Among all the human ways of life, trades and vocations, artists tend to have the most resounding voices. We can still listen to what Sappho or the anonymous authors of *Gilgamesh* have to say. In more recent times, what have artists had to say about cultural policy, which has as part of its aims to foster the creation, the promotion and preservation of artists' works? Simone Wesner has researched the role and relationship between visual artists and cultural policy in Germany before and after its reunification (WESNER 2018). In this article I will follow a similar path in order to answer the following research question: what has been the role of writers towards cultural policy in Mexico in the 20th and 21st centuries? The working hypothesis is that, although artists are generally not taken into account in the process of policy planning, some specific writers and their literary coteries have been fundamental in shaping Mexican cultural policy. If so, another research question would be: why have writers had a more predominant role than artists from other disciplines in cultural policy?

The period to be covered is both extensive, and has been studied comprehensively, from disciplines such as intellectual and literary history (CAMP/HALE/VÁZQUEZ 1991; QUIJANO VELASCO 2019) and cultural policy analysis (BORDAT 2013; EJEÁ MENDOZA 2011; GARCÍA CANCLINI 1987). Although these disciplines frequently touch upon one another, they have seldom looked at the role of artists' voices in policies designed for and about them, and especially not from within the artistic field. Due to limited space, I will only underscore a pattern that existed throughout the 20th century, where artists in government posts and from literary magazines contributed to the development of several cultural institutions and policies that eventually led to CONACULTA (National Council for Culture and Arts, 1988-2015), the first institution in Mexico solely in charge of cultural affairs, and shortly after of FONCA (National Fund for Culture and Arts, 1989-2020), in charge of artist policies. This paper will contribute to a further look into recent paths of research, such as the role of narrative in cultural policy (WESNER 2018; SOLTERO

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2020) and the interaction between artists and cultural policy in other regions of the world. Quotes from the original Spanish, included in this article, are translated by the author.

Modern is an important keyword to consider because the concept was voiced both as a modernist aesthetic pursuit among writers since before and during the twentieth century, and modernisation was also the North Star for the State, its institutions and policies—especially declared so by politicians responsible for the creation of CONACULTA and FONCA.

Octavio Paz, the country's only Literature Nobel Laureate, characterised the Mexican state as a philanthropic ogre where "Mexican bureaucracy is modern, it intends to modernise the country and its values are modern values" (PAZ 1979: 41); however, even if the Mexican state has been the main modernisation agent, it has not managed to modernise itself entirely (PAZ 1979). Some years after these institutions came into existence the emphasis on these notions started to fade alongside political, technological and economic changes, which have also altered patterns of cultural consumption and the ways hegemony is constructed, affecting the role of writers and considerably reducing their public voices and input on cultural policy.

In the first part of this article, I will draw from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production and elaborate on the category of voices. Then I will trace and examine pertinent examples of literary groups including their relation to politics and cultural policy to map the field and show the cultural forces at play, and the fruits such interaction bore. Afterwards, I will describe how, at the beginning of the 21st century, the dynamics began to change, which then had consequences on artist policies. The second part will focus on my personal perspective, which will allow me to update the literature about FONCA and contrast my trajectories as a writer and an academic. The comparison between the conditions and opportunities for the artistic and academic fields will show the state's priorities towards the latter and the consequent precarisation of artists.

Voices in the field of cultural production

Bourdieu's theoretical work states that society is structured by fields, which relate to different forms of capital (cultural, symbolic, social and economic). Actors in a specific field will struggle for these capitals in order to achieve a dominant position. Bourdieu states that the structure of

a field “is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success” (BOURDIEU 1983: 312). Here I will follow Lorraine Lim’s approach applying Bourdieu’s theory as a “reflexive framework in which we can consider the way these different elements are interrelated” (LIM n.d.: 6).

Unlike Bourdieu’s categories, which have been thoroughly theorised and discussed, voices is a term that has a more colloquial use and different meanings across disciplines, such as literary analysis, music, linguistics and psychoanalysis. Voices will usually carry a message with a purpose. Feminism, for example, has grown largely from the voices of women who expressed their points of view on gender, and its relations, in essays beginning with, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft, to writers like Virginie Despentes, and through their public and collective voices in social actions, such as demonstrations.

While studying visual artists, Wesner adopted the notion of voices for her approach for several reasons, but mainly because of artists’ perceptions of not being listened to by social actors from the cultural policy field (WESNER 2018). The notion of voices is even more intuitive when considering writers as their artistic discipline consists chiefly in having their words speak in the minds of other people. Writers also fit closely as intellectuals, in Gramscian terms, either building consensus for the hegemonic order or supporting counterhegemonic social causes (GRAMSCI 2013). Gramsci also mentions that “the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’” (GRAMSCI 1971: 57); artists have an important role in the latter. Hegemony is made possible through culture and how it disseminates and sustains itself, so writers may contribute to it not only through their literary creations, but also by the expression of their opinions and views through different media, something that paradoxically seems to have diluted from the massification of voices through social media.

Elsewhere I have argued that “national cultural policies make sense of different interests, ideologies and values by providing a shared narrative, a foundational myth which underpins cultural policy outcomes” (SOLTERO 2020: 1). Writers may provide such narratives for the state and society through their voices. In Wesner’s research, memory, myth and identity are the main categories that bind with each other and allow for understanding artists’ career development (WESNER 2018). The same seems to apply at a national level when artists’ works are used to promote these same categories through cultural policy, extrinsic and

intrinsic, as in nurturing nationalism and official history to support a political regime, as will be elaborated in the next section. Written texts had a predominant role in Mexico as forms of cultural affirmation and political intermediation. A fundamental medium for this to happen were magazines, where writers, and sometimes other artists, could use their voices to talk to each other, group themselves, debate with other cultural groups, with society and the State.

Bourdieu's analytical framework and the category of voices merge harmoniously for the specific case studied here. The aim of a magazine is largely directed at taking a strategic position in the field of cultural production and increasing different types of capital for the group that forms it. Cultural capital is directly created in an objectified way in the issues of the printed publication itself and the texts it delivers. Literary authors associated with each other cultivate social capital in the networks they join, thus enhancing their own individual capital. Their grouping, if fruitful, also allows writers to attract economic capital, for example through subscriptions or advertising, which will provide funds for the magazine to be printed. And finally, symbolic capital is more efficiently harvested collectively: the group members' literary accolades and even their inscription in literary history form part of this complex system that tends to work incrementally: more prestige and sufficient money would allow a larger print run, enabling the voices in the magazine to carry further, to a wider audience.

The sum of the previous forms of a magazine's capital contributes to how reverberating writers' voices—individual and collective—become, enhancing their chance to develop dominancy in the literary field and leverage with the State—the central axis of the system. Therefore, the voices of writers deal in another form of capital, dependent on those already discussed, which could be termed “resounding capital”. The basis of Bourdieu's theory is relational. A magazine aligns itself with its predecessors in the field, supports certain social and political causes, and criticises others. By doing so, it takes a certain position (*prise de position*) and engages in struggles for success.

Octavio Paz was active in different magazines, founding and directing two: *Plural* (1971–1976), which proved to be fundamental for artist policy in Mexico, and *Vuelta* (1976–1998). Paz's group afterward founded *Letras Libres*, currently still in print. John King mentions how the latter published a genealogical tree tracing its origin, and the legacy it identified with, to previous magazines and literary groups. As one of its roots, the tree had a group known by the name of one of the magazines

they published: *Contemporáneos*. In this genealogy, we have a magazine positioning itself in a continuum of tradition and prestige within the field, enhancing its own symbolic capital by doing so. My selection of texts and writers for this article has largely to do with their resounding capital and the yields borne. They are voices that can be heard to this day, through the texts in which they expressed their message. When writers' voices are valued, they are kept alive through re-editions and studies about their work, and preserved in archives and libraries, both in printed editions and digital format. A particular focus in this article is on voices whose resounding effects were strong enough to bring tangible positive repercussions to the field of cultural policy.

In order to answer the research questions of this article I analyse writers' texts such as manifestos, essays, books and memoirs, their literary and political careers, historical and sociological accounts, along with social media discussions and my own participant observation from a dual perspective as an artist/researcher who has benefited from artist policy. Participant-observations will be carried out using an autoethnographic approach.

Ruíz Junco and Vidal Ortiz understand autoethnography as “a way of doing research that uses the personal to investigate the social” (2011: 193). They add that, in sociology, the terms ‘ethnography’ and ‘participant observation’ are used interchangeably (2011: 196); they foresee an increase in the use of approaches that use “a combination of methods, such as interviews, participant observations and document analysis among others” (RUÍZ JUNCO/VIDAL ORTIZ 2011). Accordingly, in this article a historical account provides a wide panorama of the field, focusing on the creation of a national artist policy in Mexico, and then I give my own trajectory and personal experience as a specific case that provides a counterpoint for further analysis.

The autoethnographic perspective “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (ELLIS/ADAMS/BOCHNER 2019). Consequently, it produces research articles that are subjective and personal. In this case this will add an extra analytical layer, regarding my experience, in how the incentives of public policy have affected my own external and internal motivation as an artist.

Autoethnography also “treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (ELLIS/ADAMS/BOCHNER 2019). It is thus appropriate to frame the present research from a Global South perspective

addressing the difficulties faced. Some of the authors reviewed here have criticised Mexico's chronic centralisation, which in the almost half a century since they spoke has not decreased. In the state of Guanajuato, where this research was carried out, there is not a single well-provided library. The closest is hundreds of kilometres away in Mexico City, where libraries still have limited services due to the Covid pandemic. However, this has also worked as a filter to select the voices examined for this article, as their resounding capital had to be enough to still exist beyond the printed copies in archives in the capital of the country, through digital repositories or re-editions.

The 20th century: modernity in literary cenacles, politics and cultural policy

Mexico had the earliest social revolution of the 20th century, which started in 1910. The political regime that came afterwards lasted for the rest of the century with the same political party, PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party), which, however, changed its name several times before landing on its third and current name. Building its own hegemonic consensus after the revolution, it tried to distance itself from the previous dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz. Fundamental for this task was José Vasconcelos, a writer who fought in the revolution, was briefly the rector of the National University in 1920 and then the first head of the newly created Ministry of Public Education (SEP).

In the three years he lasted in the post he started a new educational system and a cultural policy of revolutionary nationalism whose imprint is still followed a century later as the main paradigm in the country. His approach mixed high and popular culture through artistic manifestations like Mexican muralism, massive editions of the classics and public demonstrations of traditional dances. Painters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros were in charge of creating visual narratives of the nation through muralism for a highly illiterate population that worked as foundational myths of the new regime.

The hypothesis of this article is that in Mexico the voices of some writers had a crucial role for cultural policy, far more influential than artists from other creative endeavours. Why this pre-eminence? Most artists from other disciplines also join movements and write manifestos, as proclamations of their poetics that may become dominant voices in the aesthetics of their own field, like the dadaists and surrealists.

They may also be interviewed precisely to hear and preserve their voices. Painters work with images and colour, dancers with movement, but unlike writers, they do not have words and their own voice as the main input of their art.

The muralists mentioned above are a good example, because they are some of the most recognised and influential Mexican artists of the 20th century. Their work persists, there is an entire literature written about them. Their own personal voices, however, as studied for this article, have largely faded. They also had a close and contradictory relation with the State: Rivera convinced the Mexican president to give asylum to Trotsky, who was being chased around the world by Stalin. Siqueiros was imprisoned several times for his political activism, which included machine-gunning Trotsky's bedroom. Rivera was also director of the School of Visual Arts, which shows his interest and commitment in the formation of new artists. Orozco left an enlightening short autobiography. However, none of them took a resounding position regarding cultural policy.

The new beginning of Vasconcelos' ministry was in several senses more performative than historically accurate. In Díaz's regime, a similar ministry was created (Public Instruction and Fine Arts) and in charge of it was the writer and scholar Justo Sierra, who mentored Vasconcelos. Writers had a very active role in forming the Mexican State since independence (achieved in 1821), and some would frequently run, or at least work at, the Ministry of Education during most of the 20th century. Again, this is a difference with artists from other fields that did not have such direct participation in the development of institutions and public policy.

According to García Canclini (1987), what he terms the paradigm of cultural democratization in Latin America began with Vasconcelos. The premise is that a better distribution of cultural goods and services helps balance social inequalities. Although Mexican cultural institutions cyclically mention aspirations towards a participatory democratic paradigm, its cultural policy mostly remains in this model, identified by Mulcahey (2006), as a top-down, centre-periphery operation. Since Mexico's independence, cultural institutions and activities have been based upon their alleged extrinsic positive effects. Most parties involved share a firm belief in the social transformative powers of the arts, and there has been a matching official rhetoric about their key role in bettering citizens to foster social development (SOLTERO 2019, 2020).

Ejea Mendoza (2011) finds that since Vasconcelos, the Mexican state has tried to keep a certain closeness with some artists and intellectuals, usually by commissioning their work or employing them:

This line of action allowed the government, on the one hand, to maintain its concern for and promotion of arts and culture, an issue that has characterized the post-revolutionary state, and on the other hand, provided a group of artists and intellectuals, who, although independent and sometimes critical of the government, could serve as a group of intermediation and legitimation for the government in turn (EJEA MENDOZA 2011).

Vasconcelos' personal secretary at the National University was yet another writer, Jaime Torres Bodet, who belonged to the literary group known as *Contemporáneos*, as the magazine first published in 1928. The periodical included poets like Carlos Pellicer, José Gorostiza, Salvador Novo and Xavier Villaurrutia. They did not have a manifesto, unlike similar groups such as the modernist avant-garde, *Estridentistas*, or a clearly detailed programme of action. They united instead around the desire to modernise literature and other aspects of culture. This tendency began at the end of the 19th century and writers in Mexico would cyclically revolve around it during the following century. Although every cénacle would discuss and advocate their own version of what "modern" meant, it usually included creative freedom, internationalisation and cosmopolitanism. Although both "modernism" and "modernisation" revolve around the notion of modernity, they tend to be related, but independent categories. The first is used more in the arts as an aesthetic quest, the latter, as will be explained shortly, more related to socioeconomic processes.

The quality of *Contemporáneos'* literary oeuvre, their symbolic capital in the field, is still widely recognised and largely undisputed. This quality has come to overshadow their positions within the state. Vasconcelos named Torres Bodet director of one of the three departments in which SEP was organised (Libraries, Education and Fine Arts). Torres Bodet would later be, twice, the Minister of Education, as well as undersecretary of Foreign Affairs and general director of UNESCO from 1948 to 1952. Vasconcelos also hired Carlos Pellicer at the University. Pellicer would eventually head the Department of Fine Arts at SEP and found several museums, including the second largest in the country of pre-Columbian art. He remained a senator until the end of his life. Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, started his career by joining Pellicer's campaign. Other members of the group also held high government posts, as Gorostiza, who was also in charge of the

Department of Fine Arts at SEP and later became Minister of Foreign Affairs (SRE).

The trajectories of the *Contemporáneos* show two trends that would persist for the remainder of the 20th century in the Mexican literary field: the organisation of writers around magazines, and a good number earning a salary from government jobs. In Camp's study of intellectuals between 1920 and 1980, 86 percent of his study subjects had government careers (CAMP 1985), usually in two ministries, Education or Foreign Affairs (CAMP 1985). Most studied, and then taught, at the National University—another source of employment for writers. The role of the State as employer is in part due to Mexico's low cultural consumption that earns no royalties for artists, and the lack of other sources of income related to artists' calling.

In his research of literary magazines in Latin America, King first studied *Sur*, Argentina's most important literary magazine, and then *Plural*. In the contrast between both publications, King found this symbiosis between writers, magazines and the state. "What struck me forcibly as a major difference with my work on *Sur* was that in Mexico there was no equivalent of the rich cultural Maecenas [...] In contrast, the main cultural Maecenas in Mexico is the state" (KING 2007: 4). King also asserts that to fully understand a literary group or magazine, any study should "have as a necessary focus the relationships between writers, cultural institutions, and the state in twentieth-century Mexico" (KING 2007: 4).

This very point of intersection and influence saw other powerful social actors enter the field as it became more strategic during the Cold War, which was fought more with ideological than metallic ammunition. One of its battlefields was artists, intellectuals and their endeavours. They were granted strategic importance in the overall struggle just when television was beginning to catch on, and decades before the Internet and social media. According to Iber (2015), both the United States and the USSR "assumed that intellectuals would play important roles in influencing public opinion and form the vanguard of social change" (2); thus, in Latin America, "Progressive left-wing authors and artists from the region were said to be unusually close to political power" (IBER 2015: 1).

Iber describes how in this bipolar conflict, availability of economic capital increased as "each superpower sponsored organizations whose goals were simultaneously cultural and political, most prominently the World Peace Council (WPC) in the case of the Soviet Union and the CIA-financed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF)" (2015: 2). The latter funded conferences, magazines and books as part of their programmes.

The first operational directives of the CIA mission in Mexico, formulated in 1954, included guidelines towards these aims, such as counteracting overt and covert Communist activities and promoting pro-US sentiments in intellectual and cultural circles (GOODPASTURE 1969).

At the beginning and end of the Second World War, two of Mexico's most important cultural institutions were created, the National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH) in 1939, predominantly in charge of all heritage since then, and the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) in 1946. Novelist Ricardo Garibay chronicles how during these decades the same dynamic of shadow sponsorships between the state and writers would continue. While still a student in the early 1940's he got a job as a pollster for the Central Department, which left him time for his literary interests. After finding the task tiring, he agreed with a friend to invent the answers together and share his income until he was discovered and fired (GARIBAY 1992). In 1953 he was press officer of SEP, and from there he had enough influence to employ other acquainted writers (GARIBAY 1992). King reveals a similar trend at the National University, where several young writers managed to be employed in the early 1960s, at the university's burgeoning cultural centre Casa del Lago (KING 2007).

The year of 1968 saw some of the stable dynamics between intellectuals and the state crumble due to a student movement that ended with a bloody repression from the government. The army shot students at a peaceful demonstration on October 2. In that year, Garibay had been criticising the government and the president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, in articles written for *Excelsior* newspaper, until the Chief of the Agricultural Department, Norberto Aguirre Palancares, took him without warning directly to the presidential office. The president greeted him and, to Garibay's stupefaction, was soon after included in a payroll that gave him 10,000 monthly pesos (almost 5,000 euros today). Years later, Aguirre told him that the reason for taking him to the president was because the General Attorney's office warned that, due to Garibay's criticisms, the writer was about to "be taken care of" (GARIBAY 1992: 259–263, 271–282). At conflictive times like this one, the relationship between the government and artists could extend from bribery to repression, depending on their attitude.

The next president, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, was responsible for another episode of repression against a student demonstration (1971), but during his term (1970–1976) he attempted to ameliorate relations with intellectuals and students by pouring money into higher education

and culture. In the decade between 1968 and 1978, Mexico's GDP grew almost 600 percent, but the budget increase for SEP was over 1000 percent. Allocations for higher education grew by 1,355 percent and the subsidy for UNAM grew 1,688 percent (Latapí in ZAID 2013). INAH created a research seminar about national culture in the 1970s that integrated writers as permanent researchers, including José Joaquín Blanco, Héctor Aguilar Camín, Adolfo Castañón, José Emilio Pacheco and Carlos Monsiváis. The two latter remained in the research posts for four decades, until the end of their lives (BARJAU 2014).

In the early 1970s Octavio Paz started *Plural*, braiding the voices of a cénacle of writers, which expressed the positions they took, including their debates with the government, and their quest for and discussion of modernity. The first issue contained the transcription of a round table titled "Is Latin American Literature Modern?" As King mentions, "*Plural* was conscious that it was attempting to open a debate on Mexican political and cultural institutions, often through Zaid's articles" (KING 2007: 87). Two articles of fundamental importance regarding the voice of writers towards cultural policy were called *manifestos* by Gabriel Zaid who declared, many years later, that he penned them both. Octavio Paz, director of the magazine and leader of the literary group, suggested they appeared signed by several writers, whose support he sought (ZAID 2013; ZAID et al. 1975a; ZAID et al. 1975b).

Both articles appeared first in the newspaper *Excelsior*, of which *Plural* was a literary supplement, on September 12 and 21, 1975. They were reprinted together a few weeks later in Issue 49 of *Plural* (October, 71–73). The first one, signed by 14 authors including Paz and Zaid, was a very short Protest Against a Law Proposal regarding the creation of a National Council for the Arts. Among the complaints were the lack of autonomy and absence of artists in its structure. With his typical irony, Zaid quips: "Even in how inaptly drafted the proposal is, it can be deduced no writers were involved" (ZAID et al. 1975a: 71).

The second manifesto (Ideas for an Arts' Fund) is a lengthier follow-up, resounding enough to eventually have a considerable impact in Mexico's artists' policy. It is signed by 27 writers (13 that had also undersigned the previous one). The text opening shows a writerly *esprit de corps* about those putting forward this counterproposal to Echeverría's, "The writers that present these ideas..." (ZAID et al. 1975b: 72f.). Their main point is that for the state to foster artistic creativity it should pursue two principles: concentrate resources and decentralise activities. The scattered means the state dedicated to culture should be concentrated in

the proposed Arts' Fund, that would be an autonomous organism. This Fund would endow creative artists and interpreters, alone or in groups, as well as editors of all kinds of cultural products, organisers of cultural events, and audience groups. Half of the funds would be allocated outside of Mexico City and there would be a Board of Government formed by 10 Mexican artists, writers and critics. The Board would designate juries of five and, at least one of them would be from outside of Mexico City. The Fund's budget would be 2 percent of the one allocated to SEP (ZAID et al. 1975b).

There are several noteworthy aspects from this second manifesto. The first one is that Zaid laid down, in a couple of pages, the blueprint of what, years later, would become FONCA, the most important institution Mexico has ever had regarding artist policy. This direct transition from text to institution is important because it helps to answer my second research question: Why have writers had a more resounding voice in cultural policy than other artists? Policy must, at some point, be written down. A manifesto can thus become policy more swiftly than a sculpture or a mural. The second noteworthy aspect is that Zaid sacrificed his personal voice and individual authorship, by suggestion of the magazine's director, to seek a stronger impact, that is, to increase the volume of his articles to better fulfil their purpose. In other words, Zaid took a step back to allow the literary group to cast its collective and public voice, in order to promote a cultural policy. Finally, publication, first in the newspaper, and shortly after in its literary supplement, worked as the repetition of political slogans in a demonstration: they were voiced again to become more resounding, underscore their message, who was behind them and strengthen their position in the field.

A National Arts Council, which is mentioned in the first manifesto, would begin operations in 1988 as CONACULTA, an initiative of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari as soon as he started his term. It was the first federal institution in charge of cultural policy and management in Mexico until it was upgraded to the Ministry of Culture (Secretaría de Cultura) in 2015. FONCA would be created the following year, 1989. The elections that led Salinas de Gortari to power were questioned, so many see in these two institutions a policy for sweetening relations with artists and intellectuals, thus seeking their support and a wider legitimacy (EJEA MENDOZA 2011).

Beyond their possible instrumental use for the hegemonic consensus of the incoming president, CONACULTA and FONCA also materialised the hopes of many artists, as *Plural* manifestos from fourteen years earlier

indicate. For politicians it was also a step towards their aim of modernisation. Salinas de Gortari's memoir of his presidency is titled precisely: *Mexico, a Hard Step Towards Modernity* (SALINAS DE GORTARI 2013). As King notes, Salinas was also a one-time author of *Plural*, publishing an article a year before the manifestos (KING 2007), demonstrating yet another link between the literary field and power. Rafael Tovar y de Teresa was the second and (after a hiatus) last president of CONACULTA, in charge of it for 11 of its 27 years, until the institution became a ministry, at which point he became its first minister until his death in 2016. He also published a book, *Modernisation and Cultural Policy*, that clearly belongs to the same ideology that had modern as its main keyword (TOVAR Y DE TERESA 1994). According to Tovar y de Teresa, the two axes of cultural policy in modernisation should be co-responsibility and participation of artists in governmental action and decentralisation (TOVAR Y DE TERESA 1994), which seem to echo Zaid's ideas.

The newspaper *Excelsior* would continue to criticise Echeverría until he organised a coup from within the newspaper to leave it in friendlier hands. Paz and his team started new editorial projects continuing as one of the strongest cultural cenacles in Mexico, in close competition with the somewhat more left-leaning *Nexos*. In the 1990s both groups diversified beyond magazines to include mass media, developing content for public and commercial television, reaching a wider audience and thus growing their own strength in the field of public communication. During the last two decades of the 20th century these two intellectual groups rivalled and scrambled with each other for intellectual hegemony in the regime. Such influence and public presence, however, has been largely diminished since then, and is growing weaker in the 21st century.

The 21st century so far. Silencing writers' voices

In 2000, the monopoly of power that started with the revolution of 1910 finally broke, with the first president that came from a party different to PRI. However, even if there was a democratic change, the course of cultural policy remained the same. For example, in 2004 the cultural section of SRE (Foreign Office) organised an event called Malraux Seminar, with distinguished national and international speakers, that sought to find a paradigm beyond the still predominant one established by Vasconcelos. It did not. As Ejea notes, the cultural bureaucracy in Mexico has survived the government alternation since Salinas de Gortari founded

CONACULTA and FONCA, hence its permanent and non-transitional nature (EJEA MENDOZA 2009; 2011). The five presidents that have followed Salinas belong to three different parties and have different ideologies or at least different rhetoric, but they have mostly left the same people in charge of cultural policy and management. The basic narrative used by Vasconcelos about the social transformation of the arts endures, even with different, and sometimes opposing, governments.

As already mentioned, CONACULTA was upgraded to Ministry of Culture in 2015 but had its budget clipped 32 percent. It has never recovered (SECRETARÍA DE CULTURA 2020), which shows the decision was mainly performative. The current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), claims to be from the left but has made very neoliberal cuts to the state, including culture. Cuts in 2020 included dissolving all government trust funds, FONCA being one of them. The programmes of this institution are still at work, directly from the Ministry of Culture, in what has been called a Support System for Creation and Cultural Projects (SACPC), a far more vulnerable organisational frame that has since halted payments to grant holders for months and puts arts policy at risk of being modified or stopped at any moment, by decision of the president or other government officials.

The role that writers and magazines had throughout the 20th century has begun to fade in the 21st, which has consequently increased their precarisation and reduced access to some forms of capital they previously had—especially economic and symbolic. Chris Bilton researches creativity and cultural industries, and concludes how the latter have imposed their terms on the former. Context has become more relevant than content, giving a greater importance to transnational cultural industries and digital companies in the valuation and the circulation of cultural products (BILTON 2017).

The literary scholar Cruz Arzabal points out, regarding some elements of the above transformation in Mexico, the paradox of a State that is neoliberal in its economic policies and at the same time the centre of many cultural practices. The contradiction of a neoliberal thinning state that yet is the axis of the cultural field is due to four reasons: 1) The progressive decline of literary magazines, 2) a national and international canon increasingly formed by transnational cultural industries, 3) the growing construction of the state as an aesthetic and institutional mediator of artistic processes, and 4) the transformations brought by digital culture and a collaborative internet (CRUZ ARZABAL 2019). I will briefly mention three cases that exemplify some of these changes in

the current field of literary production. They are contemporary authors whose careers could be considered success stories; their books are published with recognised literary houses, they each have a literary agent, they are popular among readers and are mostly praised by the few literary critics that still produce reviews.

The first is Fernanda Melchor who, from her Twitter account, wrote a thread about how two FONCA programmes for young artists were fundamental for her in becoming a writer and developing her first novel (ALZATI 2020), which would end shortlisted for the Booker International Prize. Her thread appeared just before FONCA was dissolved. A few months later, Melchor jokingly complained, also on Twitter, about her books being shared as digital files. Even the format she mentioned (pdf) became a trending topic (UNIVERSAL 2020). In a country with few readers in relation to its population, a negligible minimum wage and expensive books, there was a huge uproar against an author earning royalties from her books. Consequently, Melchor suspended her Twitter account.

Tryno Maldonado expressed his anger in Facebook when one of the two biggest transnational publishing houses in the Spanish speaking world contacted him to say that as they had not been able to sell all the copies of one his novels, they were about to turn the 1,273 remaining into pulp, a common practice among publishers. He issued a campaign through the same social network to raise money and at least save some of the novels (MALDONADO 2021). A few months later, he decided to launch his latest literary pursuit—an ambitious novel in six books that took him a decade to write and extends over 1,350 pages, bound in three volumes—through a Kickstarter campaign instead of with a traditional publishing house. At the time of this writing the campaign has finished successfully, so the novel will have a 100-copy artisanal print run (KICKSTARTER 2022).

Finally, Yásnaya Aguilar is one of the first indigenous writers (from the Ayuujk people) that has garnered attention for her writing, largely through Twitter where she has over 53,000 followers (@YasnayaEG). She has also featured alongside Mexican movie stars Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna in documentary series about ecological concerns and traditional gastronomy. However, she stopped writing in this social platform shortly after expressing her discomfort about a social activist getting a seat in Parliament with the governing party. Her one-word comment ignited the fury of a mob of political trolls and bots that pounded her account into silence (FREZAPATISTAS CON CREMA 2022).

These instances show how even in accomplished cases, the ways of transnational publishing houses and the new digital reality precarise even the material existence of literary works, the livelihood of writers and, paradoxically, even when some of these technological outlets seem to temporarily empower writers from disfranchised social groups, the attitudes and behaviours that characterise them can silence them in more definitive ways than before. Unlike the *Plural* manifestos of the 1970s, none of the tweets from Melchor can any longer be found on Twitter—only their trail in newspapers and magazines. Amid the tendencies of this new cultural order, artists can disappear because of not being commercial enough or from saying something uncomfortable, which are traditionally characteristics that define being an artist.

FONCA examined

As seen, writers contributed to different areas of cultural policy, but their most enduring influence was on artists policy. FONCA has been the most important institution in Mexico regarding this category. The first 20 years of FONCA, since its creation until 2008, were scrutinized by Tomás Ejea Mendoza. I will first sum up his criticisms, and then show how some of them were addressed in the following years, from when he stopped his analysis to the disintegration of FONCA in 2020. Even if the fund no longer exists, the programmes discussed here still do, and their characteristics persevere albeit the change of institutional framework from which they operate. I will also provide an insider look that comes from a dual perspective in my case as a literary author and researcher who has benefited directly from FONCA's programmes. This perspective may help to better understand some of the programmes' inner workings and how they worked internally on artists, and on their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Ejea Mendoza looked closely at the objectives and operational conditions, especially the decision-making processes, of FONCA and two of its programmes, one of them the National System of Art Creators (SNCA), which provides artists, 35 years or older, with a three-year grant to complete a work plan. Ejea Mendoza acknowledges that, beyond its likely instrumental function as a democratic lubricant after a questioned election, CONACULTA also represented a real attempt to modernise cultural policy, giving the field more resources and autonomy. FONCA contributed to this pursuit with a “system of grants and incentives

that would allow creators and artists to have sufficient resources to, in a stable manner and without economic pressure, carry out their work” (EJEA MENDOZA 2009: 24).

Ejea Mendoza focused his sociological analysis on two dimensions, first set down by Zaid: co-responsibility in decision-making and de-concentration of resources in two programmes, one of them SNCA, to underscore the democratic and discretionary features of their selection mechanisms (EJEA MENDOZA 2011). Gerardo Estrada was appointed director of INBA (National Institute of Fine Arts) in 1992 and he recalls that then, before this function was transferred to FONCA, part of his responsibilities was managing a budget to provide grants for artists and their projects. He recognises that it was entirely his decision and thus a discretionary process (ESTRADA 2020).

Ejea Mendoza mentions that to understand the decision-making process for selecting the grant recipients, it is necessary to examine three groups of actors: the beneficiaries, the commissions that select them and the officials who appoint the members of the selection commissions. He found that there were vertical and horizontal processes of decision making simultaneously at work: on one side, a very top-down dynamic, as the president of the country directly named the president of CONACULTA, who in turn appointed the head of FONCA, and who then elected the members of the selection commissions (2011). But, on the other side, within the commissions, the process of selection has been horizontal, plural and participative (EJEA MENDOZA 2011). He also recognises how FONCA reacted to some criticisms about the objectivity and impartiality of the selection process, albeit partially, like an Ethics Code (2011) against conflicts of interests, such as participating in the selection of a beneficiary to which a member of the commission has ties.

Plural's manifesto of 1975 advocated for an arts fund that concentrated the state's resources dedicated to culture in order to increase its impact and stop the duplication of tasks. Ejea Mendoza examined how the resources allocated to FONCA were distributed to see if there was a de-concentration, as an aim of a more democratic and modern arts policy, that allows those resources to reach diverse segments and does not concentrate in some. Instead, Mendoza found precisely the opposite. He asserts that FONCA had traditionally concentrated its resources in three groups: first, a regional concentration in the capital, Mexico City. The number of beneficiaries per thousand inhabitants outside the capital was .04, while in Mexico City it rose to .72 (EJEA MENDOZA 2011). Second, a concentration by age, where the number of grants to young people

was greater, however their economic heft benefited fewer older creators (2011). And finally, there is a concentration of financial resources on individual projects, instead of collectives. Thus, FONCA has benefited especially older individuals from Mexico City (EJEA MENDOZA 2011).

A view from within

I will now succinctly account for how I started writing and about my professional trajectory. Since elementary school I turned into a devoted reader and soon it became part of my identity. During secondary school, I realised two things: that I wanted to become a writer and that I would not make a living out of it, as friends reminded me constantly. When I was in university my first book of short stories came out and I joined a literary magazine which I later directed. I knew I was unlikely to be able to make a living from writing, but I could not think of a day job compatible for me. Unlike the professional trajectories mentioned previously, working in government did not appeal to me as it seemed too bureaucratic or involved writing speeches for politicians. Other authors worked in the private sector, writing soap opera chapters or copy for advertising agencies, which seemed even more mercenary. Because of the editorial skills I had acquired I soon found myself working in the publishing departments of different universities.

I moved abroad to the United Kingdom, worked in the international office of the university where I studied for an MA and wrote my first novel, which eventually won a national prize in Mexico. For a short period afterwards, I attempted to work only at writing, including freelance pieces for magazines, but soon, the little they paid—if they did—deterred me. Five years working at different universities made me think that academia was a more sustainable track and closer to my interests, so I started working toward a PhD.

I always had FONCA present as a source of possibilities and applied to its programmes accordingly. As a result, I have been a beneficiary of its grants on five occasions in three different programmes in a span of two decades that have fostered both my literary and academic careers. FONCA contributed to the tuition and expenses of my MA in Creative and Media Enterprises in the UK, through a scholarship for postgraduate studies in the arts and cultural management. I studied part-time between 2000 and 2002. A couple of years later I was invited to form part of the selection commission, for this same grant, twice. In 2007 I

received a grant in the Young Creators programme, in the category of novel writing. Three years later I was admitted for the first time to SNCA, again in literary fiction. In 2015 I once more joined SNCA for another three years. In 2018, I was appointed to SNCA's commission for literary fiction. Besides participating in the selection of beneficiaries, I reviewed their yearly report and advances.

These experiences give me an internal point of view about FONCA, as an artist, a judge and a researcher, that so far has not been used to analyse this artist policy in Mexico. FONCA has been fundamental in increasing all forms of capital for me. Concerning symbolic capital, I always include being part of SNCA in my book covers and CVs, but only in Mexico, which also highlights that it is limited to the Mexican field of cultural production. My earlier grant, as young creator, gave me a number of peers—increasing the social capital of my network—and a close novelist friend, who has presented and reviewed my work. The economic capital provided has been fundamental, as it contributed (in Virginia Woolf's terms) to my three guineas and personal room—basic conditions needed by artists of all genders, albeit not equally, but profoundly: several friends and acquaintances who are, or aspired to be, writers have had to move back with their, or their spouses', parents. And finally, the carrot and stick dynamic in the combination of stimulus and deadlines of FONCA's programmes has helped me finish my books and other texts, the type of objectified cultural capital that an artist policy aims to foster.

Ejea Mendoza's work suggests some collusion of artists' cliques. There is a considerable amount of conspiracy thinking along these lines. Such perspective precedes FONCA; for example, in 1967 Luis Guillermo Piazza published his *roman-à-clef*, *La mafia (The Mafia)*—about the regular authors of the literary supplement *La Cultura en México*, portrayed precisely as members of a shady cenacle. Carlos Monsiváis, director of *La Cultura en México*, declared “Later on I realized that the mafia was just the name that people who were failures or who were still trying to make it gave to those who were working and were successful” (in KING 2007: 30f.). These two perspectives, the one that validates processes in the field and the one that cries foul, are still very alive among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. My testimony about FONCA could be accused of protecting a system I profited from, however, the members of the commissions that selected me would not recognize me if we bumped into each other in an elevator, so a case for cronyism would be hard to sustain. As a beneficiary and judge, I have never been censored, pressed or even nudged into any decision or course of action.

Participant observation is important for assessing artist policy because there are aspects of the programmes that can only be observed from within. A possible flaw in FONCA in this respect would be that to verify the transparency in the allocation of grants, you had to be part of the commission that gave them. Despite having belonged twice to SNCA, the process of how people are selected only became clear to me when I was a judge. From what I have been able to observe, the procedures have been refined during their decades of operation in a positive, ongoing organisational evolution that, nevertheless, the fund was unable to communicate. I will now mention some of these changes applied in response to criticisms received. They will contribute to show some positive aspects of an artist policy developed upon artists' voices that is now increasingly fading, like artists' voices themselves.

Ejea Mendoza observed that FONCA tended to concentrate these benefits on older artists. In my first time as grant holder of SNCA, the programme had introduced a three-tier system by age (i.e., 35–49, 50–64, 65 onwards) and sought to grow the number of beneficiaries. However, this age tier system lasted only a couple of years, as the increased number of beneficiaries brought along an increase to over 50 percent of SNCA's budget from 2010 to 2012 (SECRETARÍA DE CULTURA 2018), that the State was unwilling to sustain. Ejea Mendoza also pointed out that the verticality in the Fund had to do with the appointment of the members of the selection commissions. That top-down approach no longer exists, as now the members are balloted from previous grant holders, a randomness that erases the verticality in the choice of judges. When I was appointed, curious about who the other judges were, I naively asked for their identities and received no answer, which also speaks of a care for preventing collusion.

Ejea Mendoza also assumed that in the meetings of the commissions there was debate and dialogue, where the members expressed their opinions about the projects presented (EJEA MENDOZA 2011). Perhaps it was so at some point, but currently jury members review applications individually once administrative staff have verified that the applications are complete. Contrary to Ejea Mendoza's notion, there is no possibility to advocate for someone, the decision depends entirely on the consensus of the judges based on the total of points and votes in the evaluation sheets they deliver separately. During my time as judge, candidates who received five or four votes were given the grant almost automatically. The discussion therefore centred on who among the cases with three votes and the highest scores should get a grant, and why. This system

seems more objective and generous than literary prizes, which I have also judged, as the latter are awarded to a single person no matter the number of contestants. Furthermore, such prizes can sometimes be decided more upon the bargaining skills, or the dominant position in the field of a particular judge, rather than the literary merit of the manuscript.

Finally, there are two existing stimulus systems the State has for my two professions in Mexico. Besides SNCA there is a similar grant system for academic researchers: SNI (National System of Researchers). Both form part of a public policy that seeks to foster the production of intellectual property. The way both systems are organised and the size of their budgets, suggests that the State in Mexico cares considerably less for artists than for researchers.

SNCA is made up of 600 members each year, while SNI has 36,555 researchers as of 2022, a number that tends to grow yearly. In other words, the number of academics benefited is over 6,000 percent higher than the number of artists. The average annual budget for SNCA and Young Creators, together, is less than half of the monthly payroll of SNI. SNI's budget is also greater than the total budget received by the Ministry of Culture (CONACYT 2020; SECRETARÍA DE CULTURA 2020). Unlike SNI's grants, which increase yearly, the ones from SNCA are a fixed amount, constantly eroded by inflation. Researchers, on the other hand, have a permanent contract with ongoing fortnightly wages and access to healthcare, something artists usually lack. The differences between both fields are profound. Even if my heart still beats stronger towards literary writing, the amount of time I devote nowadays to academic activities is considerably higher, due to how *Homo Academicus* fares considerably better than *Homo Artisticus*.

Conclusions

Writers had a very important role to play regarding artist policy in Mexico during the 20th century. The nature of their work allowed them, since the independence of Mexico in the early 19th century—and far more than other artists, an inside protagonist role in the creation and reform of the State, which required intellectual abilities associated with writing, for example in the advocacy and drafting of policy. A clear lineage of mentorship and legacy can be traced among some writers within the State and its different institutions (political and educational), associated

with literary enclaves that became hegemonic through the magazines they published.

Writing in general, but especially in this type of periodical and collective publication, has been the most strategic move for artists to take a position in the field of cultural production. From their pages topics such as cultural policy could be debated and lobbied more successfully. The written word, its reach and persistence, allows the taking of more resounding positions in a field. Zaid's essay published as a group manifesto in *Plural* took over a decade to become FONCA. But it did, and the idea that informed such policy is clearly traceable. Despite its flaws, FONCA and its grants have substantially increased the different capitals of several generations of Mexican artists in an unprecedented way.

The 21st century, however, has brought rapid and disruptive changes in the field with technological innovations, such as digitalisation and social media. Bourdieu defined the field of literary production as, "the space of literary *prises de position* that are possible in a given period in a given society" (BOURDIEU 1983: 311). It seems that both the space and the available positions that can be taken have shifted, and writers, as other artists, have less space to occupy them. The result is that the volume and reach of their voices has decreased, diminishing their resounding capital and consequently also their symbolic, economic and social capitals as well. The contrast between the institutional systems that foster the work of artists and of academics are additional proof of how the social role of the former has lost value.

A likely reason, and further avenue of research, may be that social media has devalued one of the main principles of the artistic field that prized quality over quantity. Juan Rulfo is Mexico's most recognized fiction writer thanks to a single slim novel (1955) and the complete poetry of José Gorostiza (1925–1936) runs to under 150 pages. The value of a voice in social media has more to do, not with quality, but with the numbers attached to it: followers, likes and shares. The voices of social media may also be resounding, influencing political outcomes and policy, but they rarely are remembered a week later. Fundamental categories for artists' voices, such as memory and legacy, do not seem to apply.

An option for artists would be to promote their work through the dynamics mentioned by Bilton (2017). Personally, trying to become popular in social media does not seem so different from writing adverts for agencies or speeches for politicians. Besides, as the cases reviewed here show, it can easily backfire. Increasingly powerful actors in the field like the cultural industries focus on a business model fuelled by hits and

best-sellers. The transnational publishing industry concentrates on commercial works or young promises, discriminating against more literary books and fostering ageism in the field. These tendencies are disheartening: they undermine the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of writers. The same tendencies underscore the importance of the state as a patron of the arts and the need for a more solid and better funded artist policy.

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